

# The Communicative Language Teaching Paradigm and Key Competencies

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The purpose of this paper is to try to find a way to increase implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Japan. The paper discusses eight aspects of CLT and reviews the educational background philosophies such as *key competencies* or *ikiruchikara* (*zest for living*). CLT aims at developing the communicative abilities needed for a successful life and a well-functioning society. The Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” (MEXT, 2003) is a Japanese version of CLT.

## 1. Introduction

Though English teachers in Japanese public schools were requested to implement communicative ways of teaching English by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in the 1990s, communicative lessons in English have only been partially implemented. The Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” (MEXT, 2003) is a Japanese version of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The Action Plan aims at having students master the basic communication abilities which every Japanese needs to acquire for a successful life in a globalizing society. Will Japan be a country where people can conduct basic communication in English? The answer depends on whether the Action Plan works well in Japan or not.

“The concept of *ikiruchikara* (*zest for living*) anticipated the *key competencies* of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD)," said the summary report by the Curriculum Division of the Japanese Central Educational Council (2007). This indicates that either Japan has an original pedagogical philosophy, *zest for living*, which is equivalent to the OECD's *key competencies*, or that Japan has a different phrase, but is actually going in the same direction. The concept of *zest for living* appeared in discussing "The Model for Japanese Education in the Perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" by the Central Council for Education (MEXT, 1996). MEXT explains that *zest for living* is composed of "comprehensive learning ability," "rich humanity," and "a healthy body" (MEXT, 2005). "Comprehensive learning ability" is almost exactly the equivalent of the *key competencies*, meaning the ability to learn, think independently, and solve hands-on problems in a changing society by and for oneself. *Zest for living* is emphasized as a pedagogical concept in the new government guidelines for teaching that will be implemented in 2011, too.

To examine the connection between CLT and *key competencies/zest for living*, this paper refers to official documents from the OECD and the European Union (EU) and a research article, "Understanding and Implementing the CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) Paradigm" by Jacobs and Farrell (2003).

## **2. CLT and *Key Competencies***

The major definitions of *key competencies* are identified by the OECD and the EU. The OECD's Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) Project (PISA, 2005) defined *key competencies* as the things we need for a successful life and a well-functioning society. The key competencies are divided into three broad categories with explanations of how these are relevant to modern life. The categories are as follows:

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- 1) Using tools interactively: Individuals need to be able to use tools such as language, knowledge, and information technology in order to communicate and to solve problems.
- 2) Interacting in heterogeneous groups: In an increasingly interdependent world, individuals need to be able to interact with all kinds of people.
- 3) Acting autonomously: Individuals need to be able to take responsibility for their own lives, situate their lives in the broader social context, and act autonomously.

The concepts of the *key competencies* are the basic framework of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which assesses how far students have acquired the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in society. The EU uses the word “competence” instead of “competency,” but the concepts are similar. The EU aims at being “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” (European Commission, 2004), and it defined the *key competences* as “a transferable, multifunctional package of knowledge, skills and attitudes that all individuals need for personal fulfillment and development, inclusion and employment” (European Commission, 2004). In this phrase, “transferable” means applicable in many situations and contexts, “multifunctional” means usable to achieve several different objectives, and “inclusion” means accepting diversity and making a unit as the European Union.

The table below compares these three concepts:

Concept	Definition
<i>Zest for Living</i> (Ikiruchikara, MEXT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· comprehensive learning ability</li> <li>· rich humanity</li> <li>· a healthy body</li> </ul>
<i>Key Competencies</i> (OECD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· using tools interactively</li> <li>· interacting in heterogeneous groups</li> <li>· acting autonomously</li> </ul>
<i>Key Competences</i> (EU)	Things that all individuals need for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· personal fulfillment and development</li> <li>· active citizenship and inclusion</li> <li>· employability</li> </ul>

These three concepts (*zest for living* of MEXT, *key competencies* of the OECD, and *key competences* of the EU) have the same basic idea of producing people who can survive in a constantly changing, interdependent world. In the case of foreign language teaching, this means developing communication skills. To solve problems, it is essential for people to be able to communicate with a heterogeneous group of people using foreign languages. This is how CLT and *key competencies* are correlated and why the Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” was issued for Japanese English education.

CLT originated in the “threshold syllabus” of van Ek (Rost, p.116). *Threshold Level* by van Ek was published by the Council of Europe in 1975. It deals with the objectives for what learners should be able to do by means of language to communicate with people from other countries, to exchange information and opinions on everyday matters, and to conduct the necessary business of everyday living when abroad. The threshold level is the level at which people can accomplish the above-mentioned tasks with people from other countries (van Ek and Trim, 1998). Now, CLT indicates general teaching approaches whose goals are to cultivate communicative competence (Shirahata,

Tomita, Muranoi, and Wakabayashi, 2003). Nunan (2003) defines CLT as “a language teaching method based on the concept that interaction is the key to language learning and that students must have opportunities to communicate during lessons.” Since communicative competence is an important component of *key competencies*, it is natural that CLT is adopted as an appropriate teaching approach for cultivating *key competencies*.

As international interdependency gains speed, Japan needs more and more people who can participate in global economic competition. Even at the private individual level, the opportunities to interact with people from different cultures are increasing in this globalizing world. The goal of the Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” is “on graduating from junior high school and senior high school, graduates can communicate in English” (MEXT, 2003). The Action Plan requests teachers to conduct their classes in English and introduce many activities in which students can communicate in English. Japanese English teachers in public schools are expected to teach students “through the repetition of activities making use of English as a means of communication” (MEXT, 2003).

### **3. Eight Aspects of the CLT Paradigm Shift**

Jacobs and Farrell (2003) call today’s Communicative Language Teaching the “CLT paradigm shift,” and identify eight aspects in the CLT paradigm. The eight aspects are: learner autonomy, the social nature of learning, curricular integration, a focus on meaning, diversity, thinking skills, alternative assessment, and teachers as co-learners. The phrase “paradigm shift” was originally used by Kuhn (1970) to describe scientific change, for example the shift from Ptolemaic to Copernican astronomy. Though the paradigm shifts discussed by Kuhn emerged suddenly, the CLT paradigm

shift seems to be gradual in Japan. CLT is partially and very slowly being implemented in spite of the catchphrase, “Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities.”

An outline of the eight aspects follows. The implementation of CLT in Japan is also reviewed.

- 1) Learner autonomy: Teachers should change from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered instruction. The concept of learner autonomy is one element of the *key competencies*. The knowledge which is acquired passively in a class is not enough to solve future unpredictable problems. It is very important for learners to be aware of the problems and to study by themselves to solve them.

There are several ways to enhance autonomy. In Japan, to promote learner autonomy, some schools provide a space and guidance for autonomous learning, such as a self-access language learning center. Small group activities can be one way to promote autonomy because having students collaborate with their peers leads to less dependence on the teacher. With self-assessment, students do not have to wait for the teacher's direction anymore.

- 2) The Social Nature of Learning: Students learn from others and teach them all the time. In an actual classroom, it will be very important for teachers to establish cooperation as a value. Teachers should establish a balance between competition and cooperation. Good cooperation involves the teaching of collaborative skills and communication strategies such as disagreeing politely, asking for help, and clarification. These skills are a part of the *key competencies*.

Now most teachers are aware of the social nature of learning. Group

work, such as task-based language teaching, has become common in English classes, particularly at the college level. Project activities, such as service-learning, provide opportunities for students to gain their key competencies. Service-learning is a teaching and learning project that combines community service with academic achievement. For example, as a credit subject in the school curriculum, education major students can go to an elementary school and learn through the experience of working with pupils. To link academic knowledge and the wider world, it will be very effective for students to participate in projects such as service-learning.

- 3) Curricular Integration: The concept of curricular integration is not to focus on one subject, but to combine several subjects in one class.

The “Periods for Integrated Study” (*Sougotekina-Gakushuno-Jikan*) are suitable for implementing curricular integration because the project in the class requires cross-curricular study. The purpose of the “Periods for Integrated Study” is to cultivate ways of learning and thinking and an attitude of trying to solve or pursue problems independently and creatively (MEXT, 1998). The “Periods for Integrated Study” are set up to cultivate *zest for living*. It is very unfortunate that the merit of “Periods for Integrated Study” is not yet entirely recognized by Japanese society and educators. The concept of curricular integration will take an important role in Japanese education in response to such social changes as globalization and the development of information technology. Implementing the “Periods for Integrated Study” is a challenging but worthwhile task for Japanese teachers.

In a broad sense, content-based language classes where students learn both the target language and substantial content at the same time are

one type of curricular integration.

- 4) Focus on Meaning: People learn by chunking new information with existing knowledge. In CLT, the focus lies in using language, not in language usage. The Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” also emphasizes this. MEXT expects teachers to acquire a certain level of English ability and teaching technique which will enable them “to conduct classes which aim to develop proficiency in terms of vocabulary and grammar through the repetition of activities where English is used as a means of communication” (MEXT, 2003). Through the repetition of activities making use of English as a means of communication, communication skill is increased. It is important for teachers to establish many situations where students can communicate meaningfully with each other in English and to conduct classes principally in English.

The obstacles to implementation of such communicative classes are the lack of teachers’ skills in spoken English and the lack of students’ motivation to study communicative skills. Students often give priority to preparing for entrance examinations or to getting better test scores. This is also related to the issue of an ESL versus an EFL setting discussed later in this paper.

- 5) Diversity: Is diversity among students considered to be a troublesome thing or an asset? In a CLT environment, diversity is seen as an advantage for language learning. Diversity means differences in ethnicity, religion, social class, first language, achievement level, or learning style. In this age of intercultural communication, we have to be tolerant of cultural differences. One of the main *key competencies* is to



be able to interact in heterogeneous groups. In CLT, learning a foreign language involves the study of different socio-cultural aspects which learners have to understand in order to communicate successfully.

Japan is very much a homogenous country compared to the USA or the EU. Culturally, Japanese are relatively collectivistic, and the score of Uncertainty Avoidance is high (Hofstede, 1984). Seen from the point of view of Hofstede, Japanese have a tendency to avoid uncertainty and to feel safe in homogeneous, familiar groups. In the future, however, Japanese teachers may increasingly have to deal with diversity in the classroom. It will be better to accept diversity and make use of it. Actually, diversity can provide the language classroom with some real and meaningful communication activities.

Here is one case of diversity as an advantage in a college English class. At Hakuoh University, from 2003 to 2008, I had one English class every year for international students. Over the years there were students from China, Taiwan, Fiji, Samoa, Korea, Mongolia, and Brazil, and I discovered that it was relatively easy for the students in the class to develop topics for discussion. For example, when a Brazilian student said something like, "I wouldn't participate in any war for any reason," a big discussion spontaneously started in the group. It was a moment when the students struggled to say their own different opinions, and everybody tried to understand each other. Discussion in culturally diverse groups is interesting because the students have different social and historical backgrounds. There were also some other factors. Some students came from cultures in which they could say their opinions in front of other people more easily than Japanese students. Other students were more mentally mature or older than the general Japanese university population.

- 6) Thinking Skills: Because information is so easily obtained these days, the essential thing is to use that information wisely. Problem-solving tasks include thinking skills for analyzing a problem, applying information, and finding a solution. Certainly, thinking skills are needed here. The thinking skills are the so-called higher-order thinking skills, critical thinking and creative thinking, which lead to more than one correct answer. For teachers, it is much easier to handle questions with one correct answer, so the preferred style of test questions are forms of multiple choice, true-false, and fill-in-the-blank which have only one correct answer.

From the point of view of CLT, a collection of one-correct-answer type of knowledge is less valuable than the skills for applying this knowledge to bringing personal happiness or making a social contribution for a better world. Group projects or discussions require higher-order thinking skills. Discussing global issues, such as the environment or human rights, helps students to develop thinking skills. Thinking skills are one of the main *key competencies*, too.

- 7) Alternative Assessment: How to assess CLT is an important topic in Japan. One of the controversial issues of CLT is how we should assess communicative competency. Paper tests with multiple choice, true-false, and fill-in-the-blank questions cannot be used for the main form of assessment in CLT classroom activities. From a CLT point of view, teachers should assess not only what they are teaching, but also what students are learning. Ideally, not only the teachers' assessment, but also peer assessment should be used. Realistically, those alternative assessments are not easy to practice. Since the purpose of education is directly related to the method of assessment, it will make a big difference

whether the main concern of education is to cultivate *key competencies*, or to get a better score on a paper test.

There are a variety of types of assessment, such as self-assessment, portfolio assessment, and peer assessment. When the concept of developing *key competencies* is dominant over preparing for entrance examinations, teachers can easily use those alternative assessments.

- 8) Teachers as Co-learners: Teachers are facilitators who learn along with their students. From the point of view of *key competencies*, because the world is complex and constantly changing, lifelong learning is necessary. Teachers themselves must keep studying and trying to solve hands-on problems. Teachers can show themselves as models of lifelong learners.

The CLT paradigm considers teachers as facilitators or fellow learners along with the students. It is the students who are the center in a CLT classroom. It is by students that the main activities in the classroom are done. To carry out such activities effectively, it is important for teachers to study and try to devise creative activities suitable for their students. Japanese teachers have to create their own version of CLT for their students.

#### **4. Partial Implementation of CLT in Japan**

There are several reasons why it is difficult to implement CLT in Japan.

1) Teacher factors

- ① Lack of understanding of CLT: The CLT paradigm shift should be carried out as a whole because the eight aspects are closely related to one another. Sometimes it is difficult for teachers to implement the eight

aspects of CLT. However, if teachers try group activities in which students become less dependent on teachers, share the ideas and experiences of the group members, support each other, and engage in meaningful communication, teachers end up implementing CLT and students can develop some *key competencies*.

- ② Lack of ability in spoken English: CLT requires teachers who have a certain level of spoken English fluency. Non-native-speaker English teachers have to reach this level to implement CLT. Also, they should have adequate knowledge of sociolinguistics and communication strategies (Brown, 1987). Native speakers of English are most suited for CLT, but non-native-speaker English teachers also are able to adequately use CLT by modifying it to fit their own English levels. In Japan, team teaching plays an important role in bringing CLT into the classroom.
- ③ Lack of alternative assessment for communicative competency: Currently there is not any standard assessment system for CLT, so assessment of communicative competence is a problem. It is necessary to develop guidelines for an alternative assessment system which can measure students' communicative competence.

### 3. Student factors

- ① Weak motivation for communicative competency: Most students give priority to better test scores, so they do not have a strong motivation to participate in communication activities enthusiastically.
- ② Weak English proficiency: Very often, students' English proficiency is too low to allow them to express themselves adequately in English.
- ③ Shame culture: Japanese English learners hesitate to speak English in class because of the "shame culture" (Benedict, 1946) in which they do not want to stand out or make mistakes in front of other people.

3) Other controversial issues

- ① ESL vs. EFL: Japan is a country where people generally do not need to use English in daily life, so they do not get out of the comfortable “one language” mode easily. There is not an urgent necessity for Japanese to master communicative English to make a living in Japan. English taught in countries like Japan is called English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Often in EFL situations, teachers are mostly school-taught non-native speakers. On the other hand, in English as a Second Language (ESL) situations, people use both their mother tongue and English as official languages, so there is more practical necessity to study English than in EFL situations. In ESL countries, students have many chances to hear and speak English outside of class, while in EFL countries, students usually have less of a learning environment outside school. So, the language environment (ESL vs. EFL) makes a big difference in implementing CLT. A controversial issue is whether CLT is effective in EFL situations or not.
- ② Creation of a version of CLT for EFL situations: Since CLT was originated in ESL situations, teachers in Japan have to develop their own locally-appropriate version of the communicative approach instead of accepting CLT uncritically. CLT versions for their own students should be researched and created by individual teachers. It is a model of *key competencies* for teachers to find a way to implement CLT in Japan.
- ③ Grammar teaching: Teachers should not exclude grammar teaching. Generally, learners at a certain age pay attention to the grammatical differences between Japanese and English. Since the Japanese language is quite different from the English language in grammar, grammar lessons will help fill the gap between the two different languages. Grammar knowledge works as a tool for understanding English.
- ④ Class size: Very often there are 40 students in a class in Japan, which is too

many to practice classroom activities where students can communicate in English. Half of that number of students will be preferable.

- ⑤ Accuracy vs. Fluency: In CLT, the emphasis lies in fluency, meaning, and process. Now the emphasis in Japan is on accuracy because of the importance of examinations, but teachers need to balance fluency and accuracy. Having appropriate guidelines for alternative assessment will help this problem.

## 5. Concluding remarks

The *zest for living* of MEXT, the *key competenceies* of the OECD, and the *key competences* of the EU are all rooted in the same idea, which is that self-sufficient individuals are needed in the era of rapid globalization. CLT was adopted as an approach to acquire communication skills. CLT is characterized as a broad teaching approach whose assessment is how well learners have developed their communicative competence. The one main feature of CLT is to learn communication through interaction in the target language. MEXT adopted the idea and expects English teachers in Japan to conduct their classes mostly in English and “cultivate communication abilities through the repetition of activities making use of English.” The goal of the Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” is to cultivate communicative competence in order to produce people who can function well in the future world.

Watanabe (2004) says that “it is the night before the revolution in English education.” There have been changes in Japanese English education, such as introducing the Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” in 2003, starting the listening test section in the examination produced by the National Center for University Entrance Examinations in 2005, and

finally including English classes as a required subject in elementary school from 2011. Other researchers describe these changes as a “paradigm shift” (Otani, 2003; Yoshida, 2006), which indicates a fundamental change in English education. The cause of these changes is mainly the progress of globalization and information technology.

However, there is a doubt about how well the communicative approach will settle in Japan. There are several reasons for this. One main reason is that teachers sometimes miss the larger picture. Since the eight aspects are closely connected to each other, teachers should grasp them as a whole by considering CLT as an approach to cultivate the *key competencies* or *zest for living*.

Japan’s English education is in the beginning stages of a CLT paradigm shift. From the CLT paradigm point of view, “Teachers as Co-learners” is perhaps the most important of the eight aspects of the CLT paradigm. If “teachers as co-learners” create their own teaching approach or their own CLT version to suit their own students using their own “thinking skills,” they will show their students a model of *key competencies* or *zest for living*.

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